# THERE'S HUMOR IN THE BOOK OF SAMUEL?

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# Introduction

> There is no action that is more commonplace or that has been more widely studied than laughter. There is none that has succeeded more in exciting the curiosity both of ordinary people and of philosophers. There is none on which more observations have been collected and more theories built. But at the same time there is none that remains more unexplained. It would be tempting to say with the sceptics that we must be content to laugh since it may be that reflection kills laughter and it would thus be a contradiction to think that it could discover its causes.
>
> -Ludovic Dugas
> *Preface to Psychologie du rire (1902)*[1]

The fastest way to kill a joke is to explain it. The moment one has to explain the joke it has lost the quality that makes it funny. This ineffable quality is subjective; what makes something funny is dependent on the time, place, subject, joke teller, audience, cultural references, etc. The numerous factors that make something funny make it very difficult to parse out what one might find funny now, even more so what people found funny around the time the stories in Book of Samuel were collected and written down.

Steve Allen claimed "Tragedy plus time equals comedy."[2] This idea about the nature of comedy transcends cultures and times. There are multiple comedic tropes that appear in many cultures throughout history. Humor in this category includes jokes about human anatomy, bodily functions, and jokes that make fun of how stupid the neighboring people are. Humor that makes involves cultural references and stereotypes does not make sense outside the culture and time they were made. This means that we will miss most of

[1] Translated by James Strachey
[2] Garson O'Toole

the humor in the biblical text because we do not understand that it was something funny to the original audience.

The key element to determining if something could be funny would be if there was a universal theory of humor. By the 6th century BCE the Greeks performed comedy, which stood in contrast to tragedy.[3] Ever since then people have tried to understand what makes comedy funny. Immanuel Kant classifies humor as a form of play, but did not see much value in it.[4] In the late 19th century Sigmund Freud attempted to explain humor in his book Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious. He argued that jokes are a way for people to release the suppressed psychic energy originating from sexual and violent thoughts. He writes that this energy is pent up in the unconscious similar to dreams.

At the time he wrote his work, Freud was still trying to prove the existence of the unconscious. The analysis of jokes is a way for Freud to reinforce his theory of the unconscious. Freud claims that one's enjoyment of jokes stem from the process of releasing suppressed psychic energy. In his analysis he explains that, "we found ourselves obliged to locate the pleasure in jokes in the unconscious… all the analyses we have hitherto made have pointed to the source of comic pleasure being a comparison between two expenditures both of which has been ascribed to the preconscious… the joke, it may be said, is the contribution made to the comic from the realm of the unconscious."[5]

While Freud's motives for analyzing humor support his own theory, his analysis adds to our understanding of humor. Freud- focuses his analysis on jokes instead of the larger field – humor. He calls humor that is not in joke form jest. He explains that jest

[3] John Morreall
[4] Ibid
[5] Sigmund Freud pp. 258

brings less satisfaction than jokes and "need not be valuable or new or good."[6] Interestingly enough, Freud classified a pun that appears with a set-up a joke, but puns that one says off the cuff are jest. Most of the humor in the Book of Samuel would have been classified by Freud as jest. Due to his focus on jokes Freud's theory of humor is not universal and does not explain why puns are funny or why tickling makes one laugh.

Peter McGraw, PhD, and Joel Warner develop a truly universal theory of humor. In their book the two authors travel around the world testing this theory. They write that humor stems from *benign violation*. This idea holds that in order for something to be funny it must be a violation of some kind. Here a violation is, "when something seems wrong, unsettling or threatening."[7] Where Freud would argue that this violation taps into something repressed in the unconscious and causes a person to react by laughing McGraw and Warner understand one's reaction differently. McGraw and Warner argue that what makes a violation funny is when it "simultaneously seems okay, acceptable, or safe (i.e. benign)."[8]

The pair tests their theory against many different types of humor. They travel to Los Angeles to examine improvisational comedy and compare the benign violation theory to it. They travel to Osaka, Japan to test their theory against Japanese humor. They spend time in Gaza analyzing humor in a place where the people are suffering. The two even take part in Hunter "Patch" Adams' Gesundheit Global Outreach clowning mission in Belén, Peru to examine how their theory compares.

[6] Freud pp 158
[7] McGraw and Warner, pp 10
[8] Ibid

The benign violation theory even explains why tickling makes someone laugh. The violation in tickling is a violation of space: a person is encroaching on another's sensitive personal space. One cannot tickle him or herself because that would not be a violation. Tickling only makes one laugh when he or she knows the other person (and knows they are safe). This makes the violation benign and causes that person to laugh. If a stranger tried to tickle someone, that person's *flight or fight* response would kick in – not tickle him or her.

In an attempt to show the benign violation theory as a universal theory McGraw and Warner fly to Osaka, Japan –the humor capital of Japan. They learn that "there is no wholly accurate Japanese translation for words like 'comedy' and 'humor.'"[9] Yet if one were to point a finger at a stranger in Osaka, they will pretend to be shot (just do not try this as you may inadvertently point at a *yakuza*).[10] The pair try to understand Japanese humor. They learn from Christie Davies, a British sociologist and past president of the International Society for Humor Studies, that there are some types of jokes that appear in almost every culture – e.g. stupidity jokes.[11] These jokes make fun of how stupid the neighboring people are: these jokes show up in the *Philogelos* – the oldest known joke book. In it the Greeks make fun of how stupid the people in Cyme (modern day Turkey) and Abdera (in Thrace) are. Tajikistan makes fun of the Uzbeks, the Brazilians make fun of the Portuguese, Finns make fun of Karelians, and Nigerians call the Hausas stupid.[12] The only place these jokes do not appear, according to Davies is East Asia.[13]

[9] McGraw and Warner pp 95
[10] McGraw and Warner pp 100
[11] Ibid pp 98
[12] Ibid
[13] Ibid pp 99

Like most humor, Japanese humor relies heavily on context. This makes it very hard to translate comedy. In order to understand what a violation for the culture would be one must understand the context in which that culture lives. Humor takes shared cultural experiences, beliefs, expectations, and taboos and subverts them – usually with only a hint.[14] Yet there are some humor motifs that show up again and again in many cultures, like the stupidity jokes.

The wily trickster motif appears in "Native American culture, Ancient Greek myths, Norse legends, African folk talks, Tibetan Buddhist practices, Polynesian religious tales, Islamic fables, and even 17,000-year-old cave paintings in France."[15] By the end of their trip to Japan they declare the key to universal harmony and hilarity to be "peace, love, and dick jokes"[16] because every culture makes jokes about anatomy.

McGraw and Warner travel to Ramallah and the Gaza Strip to examine humor in "one of the most historically unstable regions of the planet, a place synonymous with violence and suffering, suicide bombers and grieving mothers, deep hatreds and lost hope."[17] The duo wants to see how humor flourishes under these circumstances. They cite several examples from history when people relied on humor to get them through a period of suffering.

In 1968 North Korean naval ships captured a United States spy boat – the USS *Peublo*. Their captors demanded the prisoners write home "renouncing their evil

[14] McGraw and Warner pp 104
[15] Ibid pp 113
[16] Ibid pp 118
[17] Ibid pp 147

capitalist ways."[18] The prisoners proceeded to write joke letters. One of the crew wrote, "Say hi to Howdy Doody for me."[19] Another admitted to having been given orders "'in the TOP SECRET Japanese lair of the CIA's evil genius, Sol Loxfinger,' a name her borrowed from a James Bond lampoon in *Playboy* magazine."[20] The same officer later wrote about his "'fervent desire to paean the Korean People's Army navy, and their government.' Apparently nobody noticed that he'd stated he wanted to pee on his captors."[21] These officers used humor to help them survive being prisoners.

Even during the Holocaust people leaned on their ability to laugh. Steve Lipman, author of *Laughter in Hell: The use of Humor during the Holocaust*, explains, "It was a coping tool, a way to step back and take control of the situation in some small way."[22] Humor arises even when the fear of death is imminent. Humor can be used as a form of self-defense. Sometimes it comes out as self-deprecating humor, sometimes titled "Jewish humor."

Humor scholar Elliot Oring argues against the idea that Jews have a "monopoly on self-deprecating underdog jokes." He also points out, "there's no proof, no Talmudic comedic passages or ancient Israelite joke books that suggest the Jews' reputation as jokers is anything but a modern creation."[23] While it may be true that no Israelite joke books have surfaced it does not mean that the ancient Israelites did not make jokes.

[18] Ibid pp 153
[19] McGraw and Warner pp 153
[20] Ibid pp.154
[21] Ibid
[22] Ibid pp 164
[23] Ibid

In the Book of Samuel there are numerous examples of humor. This paper will attempt to examine a few of these humorous moments sewn into the narratives. We will treat the later divided books of Samuel as a single book, that is a compilation of work from different authors collected over time. Some of the stories favor Saul, some deride him. The final editor of the book did not favor the monarchy and this is reflected in the narratives.

The humor this paper will examine is mostly derisive, targeting the Philistines, King Saul, and King David. The trickster motif appears in the stories about King Saul and young David. David thwarts Saul's attempt to get the upper hand and Saul ends up looking like a fool. The humor deriding David is often indirect. The humor portrays David as not having control over his house and allegorically makes fun of the Davidic rulers of the time.

# Philistines

I Samuel 5 is a prime example of Israelite humor at the expense of its enemies, in this case the Philistines. This short chapter derides the Philistines in two ways. The first part of the pericope first discounts the Philistine victory over the Israelites, and then subjugates their god, Dagon, to Yahweh. In the previous chapter, the Philistines had won a battle with the Israelites at Eben-Haezer. Israel was in a period in which it lacked a charismatic leader who might unite its tribes. In the Philistine victory over Israel, the Philistines took the אֲרוֹן הָאֱלֹהִים to Ashdod as spoils of war and placed it in a shrine to Dagon.

The second verse of the chapter repeats that the Philistines brought the ark to Dagon's dwelling. The first half of the verse tells us that they brought the ark to בֵּית דָּגוֹן while the second half tells us they placed the ark אֵצֶל דָּגוֹן. Alter notes that this second half suggests the Philistines were either trying to amplify the power of Dagon or to express the God of Israel's subservience to Dagon.[24] I think the latter is more likely. This is the set-up of the joke at the Philistines. They have shown their arrogance in believing their gods are more powerful than the God of Israel, which the audience knows to be untrue; they know that their God will act to show the Philistines their error.

When the Philistines wake up the next day they find that Dagon has נֹפֵל לְפָנָיו to the Ark. The use of this phrase harks back to the Joseph Story in Genesis. This phrase is used when Judah bows down to Joseph to beg mercy for Benjamin, and again a few

[24] Alter pp.263

chapters later when all of Joseph's brothers proclaim that they are his servants. The Israelite audience might recognize this inter-textual reference thereby creating dramatic irony. This moment may have brought out some laughs from the Israelite audience in part because of the irony and in part because the story has undermined the superiority of the Philistines by showing the Israelite God more powerful.

The Philistines then put Dagon back in his accustomed place. This creates another opportunity for the Israelites to laugh at the Philistines. The audience knows that Dagon did not fall over by accident. By their actions the Philistines are shown to be fools because it was clear to the Israelite audience that their God is mightier. In the next verse the Philistines find Dagon again נֹפֵל לְפָנָיו to the Ark. The Septuagint does not reflect this reiteration of Dagon נֹפֵל לְפָנָיו while Josephus suggests that this happened frequently.

The repetition in this scene – where the statue of Dagon is found again bowing to the Ark—increases its comedic effect. With the recurring scene it takes on a slapstick quality. The comedic effect of the mirror scene in the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup* increases each time Groucho peeks around the corner. In the brawl scene at the end of Blazing Saddles, each new set on which they fight repeats the scene and heightens the humor in the moment. The important part of the repetition is that there is slight variation. Both in *Duck Soup* and *Blazing Saddles* each repetition is more extreme – in *Duck Soup* the actions get wilder, while in *Blazing Saddles* the sets they break on to are farther away from the "wild west" setting of the rest of the movie.

In the Masoretic text the repetition of the scene is wilder in how they Ashdodites find the statue. The first time they find the statue bowing to the ark, while the second

time the statue has its head and hands severed. Alter notes that hacking off the hands and feet of Prisoners of War was a well-known barbaric practice in the ancient Near-East.[25] The ancient audience could have found this act funny. It fits into McGraw and Warner's benign violation theory. The violation is rooted in the reality of the practice of dismembering a POW's by cutting off his hands and feet. The violation is then made benign by distancing it from the audience --it happens to an enemy's deity.

The second part of chapter Five has some slapstick qualities –including repetition with increasing change- just as we saw in the former section. Yet this portion adds an element of crude humor to the mix. Verse six tells us that the hand of God was תִּכְבַּד on the Ashdodites. Alter notes that this use of the verb כבד was used most recently to describe Eli's rotund nature, and also acts as an echo of the plagues against Egypt. A key part of humor is the set-up and the building tension. In the earlier section we saw the dramatic Irony building up to its comical release with the statue of Dagon נֹפֵל לְפָנָיו.

The echo of the plagues builds the dramatic irony in a similar fashion by employing a comedic technique called a "call-back." Comedians use this technique regularly. The effect is to recall something that the audience would recognize, which gives the audience a feeling of being part of an inside joke. In stand-up comedy comedians will make reference to an earlier joke by using the punch-line as part of the later joke. The call back fits squarely into McGraw's benign violation theory because the time that has passed between the original context and the call- back helps the make the former violation benign. The text's call-back of language relating to the plague story

[25] See Judg 1:5-7

builds the irony quickly because the audience is well acquainted with it, and foreshadows what is going to happen to the Philistines.

God then strikes the Philistines with an ailment that is not wholly clear. The Masoretic text itself has different words for the written version and the read version. In the written it says "tumors" (בעפלים) while the read version says "hemorrhoids" (בַּטְּחֹרִים). The Septuagint describes a plague of mice that overrun the city, while Josephus explains that the Philistines were afflicted with a disease that caused them to vomit up everything (including their entrails) and mice destroyed all their agriculture. Alter notes that an interpretation "at least as old as Rashi" suggests that it is bubonic plague. The tumors are the buboes which might especially afflict the lower body, including the rectal area. Whether they are hemorrhoids or tumor this is still a humorous scene.

The mighty Philistines were afflicted by a serious illness that particularly focused on the rectal area. Stories involving human anatomy (particularly rectal and genital areas) are a crude sort of humor that begins to be funny as early as five years of age. The image of Philistines running around with hemorrhoids or tumors on their rectums is a humorous image. It takes the violation of an affliction of a sensitive area and makes it benign by putting them on the enemy's privates.

The combination of the humorous image of Philistines with rectal tumors and the slapstick repetition of each town becoming afflicted as the Ark is sent from town to town compounds how funny this scene is. Each time the ark is sent to a new town the audience anticipates what will happen. When the Philistines are afflicted it becomes a satisfying

punishment for the Philistines who were militarily superior. The audience could have a sense that the Philistines got what they deserved.

Freud would see that this humor making fun of the Philistines fits his understanding. The Philistines were a military power and the Israelites were not always able to defeat them. When they depict the Philistine becoming afflicted with tumors allows them to deride the Philistines without military strength. They can express repressed aggression towards their enemy without violence.

Much has been written about the battle between David and Goliath. It is one of the most well-known scenes from the book of Samuel. Scholars have argued about its date and the meanings within it. This scene also displays humor in making fun of the Philistines. While scholars like Azzan Yadin[26] argue that the scene allegorically represents the superiority of Israelite nationhood over Greek identity, that is irrelevant for the purposes of drawing out its humor.

Before David heads to the battlefield to face Goliath in the Greek fashion of a contest of champions[27] Saul dresses David in the king's own armor. David diplomatically expresses to the king, "I cannot walk in these, for I am unused to it." Then David removes the armor. There is no account of David putting on his own armor. As Prouser[28] points out, David receives clothing many times in Samuel, but never gives anyone clothing. The detail that David put on his own clothes is a small one, and small details are often omitted in biblical stories. However, if one accepts Yadin's idea that the underlying

[26] Azzan Yadin
[27] Yadin
[28] Ora Horn Prouser

ideology of the David and Goliath story retrojects Greek culture into a biblical narrative, the story would align well with the Greek idea of the beauty of the human form.

Yadin notes that the existing Masoretic text portrays nakedness as wrong, but really it was the biblical authors who portrayed nakedness this way. Often nakedness is a euphemistic term for intercourse. Yet Yadin argues that the final form of the story was written in the Greek period when Hebrew people tried to define their identity in the reality of Jerusalem becoming a polis, or a full city. The Hebrew people were immersed in Greek culture and ideology. The writer of this tale might have agreed with the Greeks about the beauty of the human form.

From this idea one could see that the story portrays the naked David defeating an armored Goliath – or the naked body's triumph over a clothed one. Prouser notes that David "could not simply take Saul's armor as it was offered to him, he needed to earn it, and receive it piece by piece."[29] In the scene, David proves himself to be a triumphant naked warrior. One can view the symbolic receiving of Saul's clothes and armor as Saul attempting to clothe David. Yet David needed to successfully slay Goliath while being naked in order to earn Saul's armor.

In verse 40, where this pericope begins, the text says, "David took his stick in his hand and chose five smooth stones…" David's stick does not appear again in the story. Alter notes that "he took his stick" must refer to his shepherd's staff which he employs as a decoy. Alter compares this to verse 43 where Goliath proclaims, "Am I a dog that you should come to me with sticks?" Verse 43 is the only other mention of a stick. The

[29] ibid

account also says that he had his slingshot in hand (verse 40) and reached his hand into his satchel, took and slung it at Goliath (verse 46). David does not have three hands. Instead David "taking his stick in his hand" might refer to his phallus and describe his obscene gesture to Goliath.

Yadin draws the parallel between the David and Goliath scene to that of Achilles and Hector in the Iliad[30]. When Hector realizes that Achilles has bested him he cries, "Don't let the dogs devour me." To which Achilles responds, "The dogs and birds will rend you – blood and bone." The editor of I Samuel clearly knows the Homeric epic and draws comparisons to it. Goliath's taunt is an allusion rather than a literal reference to David's staff.

The biblical authors routinely use euphemisms for genitalia. The Hebrew word the author uses in verse 40 is מקל. In Genesis 30:37-8 Jacob releases the white מקל.which is in the מקלות to get his flock to conceive. In Hosea 4:12 the prophet assails the people who listen to their מקל (and their "wood," *etz)* and thereby commit harlotry. It is possible that מקלות is a biblical euphemism for a phallus. Before David charges into battle against Goliath he takes his phallus in hand to taunt Goliath.

This taunt is fulfilled when David takes Goliath's sword and cuts his head off. David, this time symbolically, uses Goliath's own sword to deliver the final blow. David even pays Saul a bride price of 200 foreskins for Michal.[31] The foreskin is the tip of the head of the phallus. The sword is a phallic symbol. Eva Keuls[32] notes that in Greek

[30] Yadin
[31] I Sam 18:27; Cf. II Samuel 3:14
[32] Eva Keuls

culture the phallus is equated with a sword. As a final victory David plunges Goliaths metaphorical phallus into his own neck.

The humor at the Philistine's expense is crude and meant to demean or belittle their military superiority over Israel. While Yadin argues that the Philistines represented the Greeks to this story's audience, the point is the same. The Greeks also had more military strength than Israel. Upon hearing about how David humiliated the great Goliath, of Greek depiction, by first pulling out his phallus, they would have laughed out loud.

Later in the book when David flees the wrath of King Saul he tries to hide among the Philistines. In I Samuel 21:11 the text explains that David went to Gath. Alter observes that a political refugee hiding in enemy lands is a "familiar enough move" for a political refugee.[33] The audience would not question why David, slayer of Goliath and hundreds of other Philistines would hide in Gath. This hideout also provides the author fodder for humor against the Philistines.

An audience familiar with the tales of David would know that Goliath hails from Gath. In the Masoretic text, the previous scene depicts David taking ownership of Goliath's sword. The juxtaposition of these two verses sets the audience up to anticipate some kind of [clash?] that David would need to find a way out of. Almost in a joking tone Alter notes "[David] would clearly have to hide the telltale sword before coming to town." This set up appears in many other slapstick routines. For example, in the Marx Brothers classic *A Night at the Opera* there is a scene when all the protagonists are eating breakfast after deceiving their way into New York. While they are eating breakfast there

[33] See 1Kings 12:17ff, 40f; 1Kings 19:36-37

is a knock at the door. Chico says, "If that's the police knock again." Upon hearing another knock the stowaways file out of the living room onto the balcony. The audience knows that at any moment the police officer could catch them and take them away. The routine continues from this set-up playing on the trope that they could be caught any moment. David too finds himself in this set up when he encounters the king of Gath—and his courtiers.

The text does not say that David went to Gath; instead David goes to Achish King of Gath. The author provides this information to preempt a future strike against the Philistines. Later in the tales of David,[34] he works as Achish's vassal. During his time there the other Philistine generals express their fear that David will betray them. To which Achish makes a speech wherein he professes that David is, and always has been, loyal. The scene in I Samuel 21:11 shows David tricking Achish. The author shows how foolish King Achish is when David, who should be trying to hide among the Philistines, goes directly to Achish.

Unlike their master the king, Achish's courtiers recognize David. They even recite the chorus that the women sang of David's victories over the Philistines. This song extolled David's military prowess, but also caused Saul to become suspicious of David. In this pericope the courtiers recite the song to identify David to Achish. David, having been found out, needs to come up with an idea how to escape, and resume the trickster role once again.

[34] See I Sam 27

David quickly decides to act like a madman. He scratches doors at the gate and drools on his beard. Josephus adds that "[David] did other the like actions before the king of Gath."[35] In the Septuagint David "drummed upon the doors of the city, and used extravagant gestures with his hands, and fell against the doors of the gate, and his spittle ran down upon his beard."[36] Each account of this moment slightly differs. From this we can draw that this is a moment in the scene where the story teller has some freedom. The humor in this scene comes from the storyteller's details. Before the text was canonized, people would tell the stories of David as a folklore hero. Alter notes that "creating a collage of disparate sources was an established literary technique used by the ancient Hebrew editors and sometimes by the original writers themselves."[37]

Sometimes these stories predated the written collection as oral stories. As Josephus demonstrates with his summary comment, the story teller could embellish how David acted mad. This moment in the story creates space for the story teller to add humorous motions and descriptions of the David. While mainly directed at teasing the Philistines, the audience and story teller could make fun of David in how far he went to act mad.

Freud points out that people do not tell stories with words alone. They add ideation mimetics[38]: they act out what they are describing. When the story teller explains how David made himself appear like a mad man, the storyteller would employ ideation mimetics. Freud would argue that when the storyteller makes gestures that are

[35] Gutenberg Project
[36] Bible Hub
[37] Alter Translation pg.559 on chapter 21-4
[38] Freud pp 238

"exaggerated and inexpedient" they would elicit laughter. This laughter comes from the absurdity in the storyteller's movements.

The humor in this moment corresponds to a common joke that comedians tell each other today—the aristocrats. This joke relies entirely on how far the joke teller wants to go. The joke is that a family goes to a talent agent's office. They want him to represent their act. So they show him. The joke teller then describes the most disgusting and taboo performance they can imagine. At the end the agent asks, "What the name of your act?" to which the family responds, "The Aristocrats!"[39] The joke, like this scene in I Samuel 21, is as funny as the joke teller makes it. The biblical author could only include part of this joke because it is a written medium.

The joke ultimately to calls Achish stupid. The esteemed David, whose song Achish's courtiers recited a couple verses before, now acts like a total madman. The punchline of the joke comes from King Achish's response to David's demeanor rather than his character. Shimon Bar-Efrat[40] observes that Achish uses the root שגע (raving mad) thrice; he uses the first person pronoun thrice; he also uses the root בוי ends in *aleph* (to come/bring) thrice. The repetition of these words show the audience that David has succeeded in making himself so repulsive to Achish that the king simply wants to make David disappear rather than killing him. Alter notes that David's display "is an even lowlier disguise than Odysseus' as beggar."

David's quick wit allows him to fool Achish. In telling the story the Hebrews get a chance to make fun of how foolish Achish was. Achish is so preoccupied with

[39] *The Aristocrats* (2005)
[40] Alter pp.365

appearance that he lets the man who defeated Goliath, Gath's own hero, go without any punishment. Achish is only concerned with how David appears even after his advisors tell him that it is David. Later in the narrative, Achish meets David again. Neither party will mention this earlier encounter, but the author of the scene in I Samuel 21 includes a small piece of information to make a recall joke when the two meet later in I Samuel 27. The Hebrew phrasing in chapter 21 parallels that of chapter 27. The verse starts with ויקם דוד and ends with א לאכי שׁמ לךגת. The author uses this phrasing to remind the audience how foolish Achish had been in chapter 21. The audience finds it humorous that Achish is so stupid he could not recognize David this second time.

# Saul

After David's famous victory over the Philistine Goliath Saul decides to keep David close to him. David fights for Saul and becomes more acclaimed for his military victories. Eventually the songs about David elevate his military prowess above Saul's when the women sing that "Saul killed thousands, David tens of thousands. Saul becomes wary of David and tries to kill him. When Saul throws a spear at David and misses, twice, he hatches a plan to be rid of David. He offers to give David his oldest daughter Merab as a wife. Saul schemes to send David out to wage battles and be killed by the enemy, which distances him from David's death.

This pericope shows an example of Saul as the fool. Saul believes that he has an advantage over David, and in a half-verse monologue Saul tells the audience his plan. In the moment the audience recognizes the dramatic irony. The Israelites know that David will survive and usurp kingship. They also know that Saul would die by his own hand. In I Samuel 31:4 arrows injure Saul and he decides it is better to fall on his own sword. This is the complete opposite of Saul's own death. This moment has more dramatic irony when the audience realizes that Saul's plan mirrors David's plan to kill Uriah in II Samuel 11.

After David sleeps with Bathsheba he sends her husband to the frontline of battle and the other troops let him get killed. The later scene is an allusion to our passage, which shows how David acts like a fool. David's letter to Joab in II Samuel 11 describes his desire that Uriah נכה "is killed." This verb is used in I Samuel 18 to describe Saul's

attempt to kill (נכנ) David by throwing a spear at him. The parallel of this word marks parallel intentions between David and Saul.

David thwarts Saul's plot in his humble statement, "who am I to become the king's son-in-law?" Alter notes that David "may actually feel unworthy of the honor." Alter explains that David's humility harks back to Saul's response when Samuel tells him that he will be king. The Jewish Study Bible notes that David's response shows his humility. The language even resembles Moses' humility in Exodus 3:11 when Moses uses the exact same phrase, "מי אנכי," when God tells him to free the Israelites from Pharaoh. It appears that David channels Moses' humility when Saul offers him the status of son-in-law to the king.

Yet this response seems too humble for David. David is not humble. Josephus ascribes David the qualities of wisdom, courage, temperance, justice, piety, hospitality, generosity, and gratefulness[41] but not humility. Feldman describes Josephus' care in presenting David to a Roman audience. He did not want to praise David too highly which could incite further messianism and revolt.[1] Yet Josephus does not describe David as humble. The Masoretic text describes David's beauty, his courage, his hot-headed nature, his quick wit and cleverness which makes this humble remark, מי אנכי, out of place. It seems that David takes on the role of trickster and wears a mask of humility to avoid marrying Saul's daughter.

This scene sets up the ubiquitous comedic trope of a fool planning to take advantage of someone and the trickster slipping through his grasp. The first two verses of

[41] Louis Feldman

this pericope set up a small vignette that plays out the comedic trope of the larger scene: Saul tries to kill David indirectly, but David successfully evades Saul's plan. Saul is a mighty military leader and fighter, but he is unable to kill one man. His inability to hunt down and kill David gives him the role of *fool*. Even though Saul's initial attempt to ensnare David fails, he tries again. The fool always thinks that next time he will be able to succeed where he always fails. Saul lucks out when his younger daughter Michal falls in love with David. Saul sees an opportunity to implement his plan. In the role of fool, Saul tries to go through with his plan without thinking it through or how it could fail and it inevitably does. The fool's plans always fail.

In order to entrap David, Saul employs courtiers to act as his messengers[42] to discreetly tell David why he should become the king's son-in-law. Saul hopes to play on David's vanity when he instructs his servants to say "the king wants you and all his servants love you." David does not take that bait; his response shows how wily he is. He asks, "Is it a light thing in your eyes to become son-in-law to the king?" He uses the verb קלל to describe what it is to become the king's son-in-law. He then uses a homonym when he describes himself as lightly esteemed – קלה. This response plays into his false humility in the earlier verse. David describes himself as poor and lightly esteemed. The remark about being poor notes his inability to pay a bride price, which Saul expects and plans for. The remark about being lightly esteemed is David's false humility. The chapter begins with David's military successes and the choruses that David has a better military reputation than Saul. David characterizes himself as lightly esteemed in order not to exacerbate Saul's dislike for him.

[42] Cf II Samuel 11

David takes on the role of wily trickster to avoid getting caught in Saul's trap. When Saul hears David's response, he believes that David has fallen into his trap. Saul sends word that he does not want a monetary bride pride; instead, he only wants 100 Philistine foreskins. Upon hearing the bride price, David's real lack of humility comes to the surface. The text uses the verb ישר to describe David's reaction. When David hears that he is capable of marrying into the royal family, he sees an opportunity to take advantage of it.

David kills twice as many Philistines as he needed for his bride price. This act shows further David's lack of humility. If David had real humility he would have brought only the required number of foreskins. Instead, David not only avoids death, but also gets to marry Michal. In this vignette, the wily trickster evades the fool's plan to get him, and gets rewarded for it.

The final few verses act as a concluding frame. Alter notes that they mirror the chapter's opening verses and bring forth the themes of David's success, Saul's fear of him, and David's great reputation among others. These themes are factors in making this story humorous. Saul's fear of David is expressed by the word ירא, which is also means "to be in awe of." In the motif of the fool and the trickster, the fool becomes more and more angry or fearful each time the trickster gets the better of him. A clichéd phrase the fool would say in this moment is, "I'll get you next time!"

The authors add further humor at Saul's expense when David slips away from Saul's attempts to kill him. Saul's own children abet David's escapes. Saul's lack of control over his house and children set him up to be the fool when he tries to kill David

(David himself later loses control of his children Amnon, Absalom and Adonijah). In Chapter nineteen, the author flips Saul's world upside down. The chapter begins with Saul's son, and heir, talks him out of his attempt to kill David, who is the threat to his succession to the throne.

Saul's daughter Michal then fools Saul's guards by building a dummy and placing it in her bed and pretending that it is David. Michal is the same daughter Saul just used as bait to have David killed. Alter notes how the author plays on allusions to Jacob's story that an Israelite audience would have known. Rachel hides the *teraphim* from Laban when Jacob flees. The humor arises from how the current story deviates from the Jacob story. The disjunction between what the audience expects, e.g. the story following the same conclusion as the one it is alluding to, creates the violation. Saul's outburst upon learning of her deception creates more of a violation. These violations become benign because the audience knows that the hero, David, has already escaped.

Saul then hears that David escaped to Naioth. He dispatches messengers to collect David. When they arrive, they find the prophet Samuel standing over other prophets in ecstasy. T. H. Robinson explains biblical ecstasy. "It consisted of a fit or attack which affected the whole body. Sometimes the limbs were stimulated to violent action, and wild leaping and contortions resulted. These might be more or less rhythmical, and the phenomenon would present the appearance of a wild frantic dance… Face and aspect were changed, and to all outward appearance the Ecstatic 'became another man.'"[43] The prophets had physically violent fits, and as soon as Saul's messengers arrive they too

[43] T. H. Robinson

began to have fits. Saul does this three times: He sends messengers and they begin to have prophetic fits.

The image that this moment depicts is a funny one. A story teller would have an opportunity to embellish the prophetic fits for laughs. The story teller could act out what happens as the story is told. One sees this same type of humor today. The most famous comedian who uses physical comedy in this way is Jim Carrey. In his early career Carrey was very flexible and relied heavily on his ability to contort his body and have wild reactions to situations in which his character found himself. Animated television shows and movies often utilize physical comedy. They are not limited by the capabilities of the human body. The television show "Popeye" depicts his muscles growing abnormally quickly and sometimes depicts industrial machinery inside his muscles. The show also portrays the ways Bluto beats Popeye thorough physical humor. Sometimes large items, like a ships anchor, will fall out of Popeye's pockets or Popeye will use his pipe to hold onto a tree limb while he eats his spinach.

The humor in this scene also fits with McGraw's benign violation theory of humor. In physical comedy the violation is the display of wild and unnatural body movements that the story teller or comedian acts out. These violations become benign the more outrageous they are. The more extreme the physical humor is the more benign it becomes. In I Samuel 19 the violation is the messengers succumbing to prophetic fits. The detail that makes it benign is how they go into the fits. The messengers immediately are struck by the spirit of God and go into ecstasy. Each subsequent time this happens the moment becomes funnier.

One idea in comedy is called, “the rule of three.” The rule states that repetition and comedy happen in threes. Many jokes discuss three people at a bar, or a question will be asked three times or an action will be repeated three times. Often in jokes the third question/ character/ repetition change because a joke needs a punchline. The author of the Book of Samuel is not telling a joke; the author creates the comedic build up with the messengers continually going into prophetic fits.

Alter notes that the story depicts folktale symmetry where there are “three identical repetitions, then a fourth repetition with a crucial change. The fourth repetition, as Alter calls it, is not quite a repetition. While Saul does go into ecstasy he does so before he meets Samuel. The author separates the humorous scene of the messengers going into ecstasy from Saul’s ecstasy. Saul goes to Ramah and asks where David and Samuel are. Alter comments that this question parallels the scene where Saul inquires about the seer in chapter nine. The author sets Saul up for a humorous twist on his early career.

The spirit of God comes upon Saul. The text uses ר והאלהים to describe the spirit that sends Saul into ecstasy. This same nomenclature describes the spirit that haunts Saul when he first needs David’s music. The author uses this imagery from Saul’s early encounter with David to play up how this moment is different. This difference makes space for the humor that follows.

Saul walks around speaking and having prophetic fits through the town of Naioth. He strips off his clothes, and lays naked in prophetic fits at Samuel’s feet. Therefore they say, “Is Saul, too among the prophets?” This is a powerful image. The king succumbs to

the רוח אלהים and flails naked on the floor. It is a moment of defeat for Saul. Fokkelman[44] notes the parallel between this etiology in chapter ten and in chapter 19. The earlier etiology shows Saul's chosenness and the depiction in chapter 19 shows his rejection. Fokkelman further points out that the repetition of this proverbial saying gives the ancient audience a richer portrayal of Saul.

There is humor in the repetition as well. In chapter ten the people ask, "Is Saul, too, among the prophets?" The question appears in poetic form. The event happens soon after Saul is anointed. The idea that Saul is among the prophets elevates his stature. Victor Eppstein[45] discusses how Saul's ecstasy in chapter ten is a public display of his chosenness. This equates his stature to that of the Judges before him. The combination of his anointment and his ecstasy mark a transition from the leadership of the judges to the rule by Kings. The question the people ask each other displays the public acceptance of Saul as a chosen leader.

The people's question is expressed in poetic form. Poetry amid prose emphasizes the poem. A few chapters later the authors write Saul's prophetic vision in poetry.[46] In it Saul realizes that he has erred and God (and Samuel) have turned against him. The pivotal moment when Saul realizes that David is a threat to his kingship is also written in poetic form. The chorus proclaims that Saul has slain thousands, David tens of thousands.[47] When the crowd asks if Saul is among the prophets the poetic form draws the audience's attention to it. The use of the couplet in Saul's anointment shows the

[44] J. P. Fokkelman pp. 280
[45] Victor Eppstein
[46] See I Sam 15:22
[47] See I Sam 18:7

peoples' "wonderment and awe for the sacred."[48] It shows God's alignment behind Saul. They see Saul in ecstatic prophecy and see God's prophecy flowing out of him.

In chapter 19 the phrase no longer is written in poetic form. The people ask, "Is Saul, too, among the prophets" in a derisive way. Their wonderment is gone. Fokkelman explains that "the spectators now react compassionately and by a shake of their head."[49] This prophetic ecstasy shows the people that God is no longer with Saul. Where the people once saw Saul being taken over with God's influence they now see Saul being forced into prophetic ecstasy.

The author employs the same phrase that shows Saul's earlier acceptance in order to degrade him through humor. Edwin Good claims that the purpose of the earlier scene was to set use it as a punch-line in chapter 19.[50] Stand-up comics call this technique a call back. In a stand-up routine the call back refers to an earlier joke the comedian calls up with a part of the earlier joke. The call back makes the audience feel part of an inside joke. In terms of McGraw's *benign violation* theory the call back reminds the audience of an earlier violation. When the audience thinks of the earlier violation it becomes benign because each member of the audience feels like only he/she understands why it is benign because they have heard the earlier joke.

Freud argues that one thing that makes one person people laugh at another is when "he makes too great an expenditure on his bodily functions and too little on his mental ones."[51] Freud explains that when a person seems stupid the audience becomes

[48] Fokkelman pp. 280
[49] Ibid
[50] Edwin Good
[51] Freud pp 242

filled with a sense of superiority and that makes them laugh. Saul embodies this exactly. He spends many resources and effort to catch one man, but every time his mental function prevent him from succeeding. The audience then feels superior to the former king and laugh at his failures. Then when Saul is taken over by prophetic ecstasy either the storyteller adds the wild movement or the audience imagines Saul flailing around. Again the idea of ideation mimetics plays into the audience's laughter at Saul.

Saul takes a short break from pursuing David to fight off the Philistines at the end of I Samuel 23. After he returns from his campaign Saul is told that David is holed up in Ein Gedi. Saul takes three thousand soldiers in pursuit of David. Once in Ein Gedi, Saul feels an urge to relieve himself. So he goes into a cave alone and begins to defecate. Meanwhile David and his band of about 600 hundred soldiers are in the same cave. He cuts off the corner of Saul's cloak and confesses to his soldiers that he feels guilty for cutting Saul's cloak. The whole time Saul has not noticed any of this; only after David calls out to him does Saul know anyone else is there.

The narrative completely skips over Saul's campaign against the Philistines. There is a lack of details about Saul fighting the Philistines. This pericope begins with an ellipsis. The previous chapter ended with Saul deviating from his pursuit of David because the Philistines are attacking his kingdom. The author does not mention whether or not Saul's campaign is successful; the author does not mention how many soldiers Saul took to fight the Philistines. Often when the narrative mentions a campaign, particularly against the Philistines, does it give details and describe which side is victorious.

At this point in the narrative, the author focuses on Saul's ineptitude in trying to catch David and his band of about 600 soldiers. The narrator does not want to highlight that Saul might have succeeded at something. The Masoretic text states that Saul was pursuing the Philistines, not that he defeated them or expelled them from the land. The Septuagint agrees with the Masoretic text while Josephus adds that Saul drives them out of the land. Josephus is unsettled by the text's total lack of description about what happened in Saul's campaign. He misses an underlying message of this section, which focuses on Saul's total obsession with trying to capture David. Saul stops hunting David only because a messenger tells him that the Philistines have already invaded. Alter notes that this is a time when "Israel's major national enemy is repeatedly sending troops against the territory."[52] Saul has almost completely given up ruling the country as he takes thousands of men to capture David.

When Saul chooses to take 3,000 soldiers with him to Ein Gedi, he illustrates Alter's point. Saul campaigns against the Philistines with an army of unknown size, but he takes 3,000 soldiers to hunt David and his small troop. Saul not only takes an army to hunt one man, but he selects them from all of Israel. Saul takes the best soldiers from the entire country to help him succeed. He almost succeeds.

Saul does find the cave that David and his soldiers are using as a hiding place, but he does not find them. Saul enters the cave alone. The author once again highlights his ineptitude. Saul does not have his soldiers search the cave before he enters it alone. He brings 3,000 soldiers who do nothing for him. The audience assumes that because Saul chose the soldiers from the whole country that they are an elite force. Alter even explains

[52] Alter translation pp.380

that Saul brings "elite troops." Yet they, like Saul, are incapable of doing their sole mission—catching David.

Saul enters the cave to "cover his feet." This is a euphemistic way to describe Saul pooping. Some translations will use the euphemism "to relieve himself."[53] Pooping is something that every animal does. Yet in many societies pooping is something that people usually do not talk about. Deuteronomy 23:13-5 describes what one should do when one poops. The passage describes that one should go outside the camp and bring a spade. Then cover the excrement (lit. "that which comes out of you"). The text explains that people should do this because God walks through the camp. The Deuteronomist, in using the verb "to walk," implies that God does not want to step in human waste (which also implies that no one else does either). The Deuteronomic code describes fecal matter as ערווה. This word, meaning "nakedness," is the same word that describes various sexual acts. Nakedness is regularly portrayed as shameful in the biblical texts[54]. Even though everyone poops[55], the biblical authors portray it as shameful.

In no other passage does the biblical narrative describe a character pooping. In Ezekiel 4:12-15 God tells the prophet to bake bread with human feces as a symbol of their impurity. In the following verses God reverses the decision and decrees that the people can use cow dung to bake their bread. Even though the passage accepts that everyone poops, it does not depict any particular person pooping.

[53] JPS Translation pp.626
[54] See Gen 2;25; Gen 3:7-11; 1Sam 20:30
[55] Tarō Gomi

This pericope depicts Saul squatting in a cave – while David and his soldiers watch. Commentators like Alter and Prouser noted that Saul is completely vulnerable and exposed when he drops his pants. When David cuts off part of Saul's cloak it is as if David had emasculated the king. They overlook the humor of the scene. The humor originates from the same thing observed by Prouser and Alter.

Saul is exposed and in his moment of complete vulnerability there are 600 people watching him. If the audience imagines themselves in Saul's place they would laugh at his embarrassment. This compares to the humorous moment when a person slips on a banana peel. People laugh because they are glad it was not them who slipped on the peel. The question that can lead to laughter is, "why does Saul not hear David and his almost 600 troops talking on the other side of the cave?" The answer is the sounds Saul must have been making in the cave—exerting himself and farting.

The authors of Samuel at this point in the narrative depict Saul in an embarrassing situation and once again, David outwits him. Saul foolishly runs into the cave without inspecting it and exposes himself while the very people he is hunting are on the other side of the cave. The author then ironically uses the character David to issue a false apology. David becomes filled with remorse for cutting of a piece of Saul's cloak. He declares, "Shame on me that I did such a thing to Yahweh's anointed, that I could have reached out my hand against Yahweh's anointed."[56]

Alter notes about David's 'apology' that some translators hold this as showing David's innocence and piety. Yet as noted earlier, this is too humble for David. Alter

[56] Translated for comedic effect

rightly notes that David realizes that he is also Yahweh's anointed and does not want to set a precedent for someone to cut his cloak while he is pooping. In addition, the author uses David as a mouthpiece to falsely apologize for demeaning the anointed king by depicting him pooping in from of his enemy. Just as David does not really apologize for cutting Saul's cloak the author also does not really apologize. Instead the author wants to make people laugh at Saul.

Freud's theory about repression plays out in scatological humor. He explains that people laugh at obscene humor because society deems it smut.[57] One laughs but feels that as a civilized person he or she should feel ashamed for laughing. The pleasure derives from the expression of a repressed idea. Even though people know that everyone defecates, society deems it unacceptable to discuss, especially in a society where nakedness is deemed taboo. The more a society censors primal acts like copulation and defecation, the funnier jokes about those topics will be.

[57] Freud pp 121

# David

Baruch Halpern demonstrates that the accounts of events during David's rule are out of chronological order[58] and concludes that the general pattern of these accounts does not suggest a positive view of David as king. The chronology in the Masoretic text makes a theological statement – David loses control of his family, military, and his kingdom as punishment for seducing the married Bathsheba and killing Uriah. The internal chronology that Halpern discusses shows a wider lack of control. These stories in effect act in a subversive way to make fun of the king. Humor can be a release of pent up anger and frustration for the powerless. We can read stories that show David's inability to control his children (i.e. his house) as allegory, showing a Davidic ruler unable to rule his kingdom. Yet making run of a ruling dynasty can be dangerous. A king can have his subject killed for writing slander. The writers of these stories protect themselves by not expressing their distaste with the contemporary Davidic ruler Instead they make fun of the king allegorically through David.

The stories show David unable to control the princes who preceded Solomon to inherit the kingdom. In doing so the writer is able to entertain the Solomonic king who probably would not be king had David's older sons lived. In making fun of David's other children, the author creates distance between the Solomonic king and the allegorical subject making fun of him. This distance is important to McGraw's theory of humor, namely the distance makes the violation (of making fun of the king) benign.

[58] Baruch Halpern

According to the chronology in the Masoretic text, the scene in II Samuel 18 depicts the end of Absalom's revolt against David. The chapter opens with David gathering troops to send out against the rebels. In verse two, the narrator shifts the nomenclature referring to David. In the rest of this pericope, whenever the character David acts, the narrator refers to him as "the king." When David's generals act, the narrator calls them עבד יהוד. The author shifts the focus from David to the current ruler by calling David "the king," and the author reminds the audience that David's generals act without his direct command by calling them "David's servants."

The king tells the troops that he will go out to war with them. The entire army says to him, "do not go to war with us." The first thing the audience would react to is that the entire army rejects David's proposal that he goes with them. The first two verses of this chapter describe how big an army David assembled. There are commanders over hundreds and over thousands. The army is so large, that David divides it into three distinct factions. Yet the entire army responds in a single voice telling David that he should not go fight with them.

David should not need his army's permission to go to war. The fact that David's army tells him that he should not go to war with them depicts a king who does not wield power over his army. The author uses the word עם (*am*) to refer to the army: this word can also be translated as "the people." This use of *am* also suggests to the audience that David does not wield power over his people.

The army continues in their unified response to David by telling him, "you are like ten thousand of us." This reference to ten thousand harks back to David's earlier

military prowess. Upon returning from war the chorus chanted “Saul kills his thousands, David his ten thousands.” The army plays into David’s vanity to convince him to stay behind. They are successful; David responds to his army by saying, “Whatever is good in your eyes I shall do.” The king has submitted to the will of his people.

This scene contrasts with one in the previous chapter where Absalom discusses military strategy with Ahitophel. The counselor offers to kill David that very night. Absalom, who makes his own mistakes in the scene, exhibits traits of a military leader. He hears Ahitophel’s suggestion and seeks more opinions before making his decision. David does not; he listens to the advice of the entirety of his army, which is opposite of what he wants to do. The author depicts the mighty King David, who was a prideful warrior trickster, as a weak man who does not make decisions about his own army.

The humor in this scene exhibits the benign violation theory. The idea that a soldier contradicts the king’s decision is a violation. A soldier should never speak against his superior officer, let alone the king. The absurdity of the entire army of thousands speaking with a single voice makes it benign. If the scene had depicted Joab, Abishai, or Ittai telling David this it would not be as absurd nor a violation. These people are David’s highest generals and can give him advice. The author chose not to put this suggestion in the mouth of one who could offer it. Rather the author creates an absurd scene that makes David the butt of the joke.

After David listens to his army’s advice, the army goes to war while David waits by the gate. As Fokkelman notes, this image parallels the beginning of Absalom’s

usurpation.[59] The parallel imagery foreshadows the end of Absalom's usurpation and sets up the next humorous moment teasing David. David charges his generals to protect his Absalom, which the entire army hears.

After David's forces, led by David's servants, defeat Absalom's forces. Absalom then flees on his mule when his hair becomes entangled in a terebinth. The crown prince dangles from the tree as his mule keeps going. Alter cites a few commentaries on the text that discuss the symbolism of Absalom's mule continuing out from underneath him. In addition to Absalom's symbolic loss of his stature, the image of him dangling from the terebinth is very funny. Alter notes that while the Masoretic text has "he was given," other ancient translations (Aramaic, Syriac, Greek, Latin and Qumran Samuel scroll) read "dangled." The image of the dangling prince falls into the category of slapstick humor.

The scene does not end with Absalom dangling from the terebinth. One of David's soldiers finds Absalom and informs his general Joab. Joab demands to know why the soldier did not strike down the usurper. The soldier cites the king's command to protect his son. The two stand there and argue about whether or not to kill Absalom. The unnamed soldier refuses to kill the prince for two reasons – he is the king's son, and the king had previously commanded the generals to protect Absalom. The soldier sets up the violation in this scene. He reminds the audience that the usurper is a member of the royal family and that David himself gave explicit instructions that no one harm him. Joab picks up three sticks that Fokkelman[60] suggests symbolize the three divisions of David's army

[59] Alter pp 533
[60] Alter pp 536

and stabs Absalom, symbolically "executing the rebellious prince on behalf of the whole army."

Once again, the author depicts David's army directly contradicting his wishes – the violation. The author makes this violation benign by making this scene about Absalom. When David stands at the gate as the army leaves it reminds the audience of Absalom standing at the gate harassing people to enlist with him in his rebellion. The author sets Absalom up to be disliked by his audience and his death warranted.

Freud explains that "one can make a person comic in order to make him becomes contemptible, to deprive him of his claim to dignity and authority."[61] The authors make fun of Absalom (and indirectly David) to express their distaste for the monarchy. They take away the contemporary monarch's authority by making the claim that David was unfit to rule. For Freud this is a valve for the author's repressed feelings about the monarch. Due to their inability to unseat the monarch they write down and collect stories that express this feeling.

Before his death, the authors use Absalom to attack David more directly. Absalom quickly captures Jerusalem during his revolt according to the internal chronology of II Samuel. Soon after he turns to his advisor, Ahitophel, and asks for advice. Ahitophel tells Absalom to sleep with the ten concubines whom David left to watch over the house. They then pitch a tent on the roof. Absalom proceeds to call in each of David's concubines and sleeps with each of them. This scene depicts David losing control of his house to his rebellious son Absalom.

[61] Freud pp 234

In this scene Absalom copulates with the concubines that David left to watch over his house. The audience knows that David left ten concubines behind.[62] This means that in a public display of dominion Absalom has carnal relations with ten different women. He is a sex machine. In order for him to "become repugnant in [his] father's eyes"[63] Absalom needs to have sex with each of the concubines. Ahitophel's advice resonates with the Levitical law that prohibits one from sleeping with his father's wife.[64] The punishment for this transgression is to cut that person off. Ahitophel states that after Absalom sleeps with David's concubines the people will know that the ties between the father and son will be cut.[65]

Halpern reasons that Absalom was at least in his mid-20s by the time he died.[66] This estimate means that when Absalom took Jerusalem he was about that same age. Even for a young man in his early to mid-20s sleeping with ten women is almost unbelievable. The sexual stamina that Absalom needs to have carnal relations with all of these women at once is extraordinary. In addition Absalom must have been under a lot of pressure to perform. It would have been embarrassing for him if he could not perform.

The recognition of this possible embarrassment of the royal family can be a source of humor in this moment. Anticipating embarrassment is a common source of humor. It fits into McGraw's theory because the embarrassment is the violation. This violation becomes benign because someone else is embarrassed.

[62] II Sam 15:16
[63] II Sam 16:22
[64] Lev 18:8
[65] See Gen 35:24 and Gen 49:3-4
[66] Baruch Halpern pp.235

The scene also causes embarrassment for David. The next time the bible describes David going to bed with a woman, he "does not know her."[67] In this scene David is old and the implication is that he is unable to become erect. This is obvious because his servants find a virgin[68] who is still a virgin after she shares a bed with David. The authors of Samuel draw this comparison when they claim that Absalom's revolt began "at the end of forty years" which would be David's last year as king.[69] This comparison draws the audience's attention to the contrast between father and son –Absalom sleeps with ten of David's concubines while David cannot even sleep with one woman.

A consequence of Absalom sleeping with David's concubines adds another piece of humor deriding the royal family. The narrative does not give the names of the concubines whom Absalom beds. This missing detail means that any member of the royal family who is not directly named in the account could have been fathered by Absalom. Halpern's relative chronology places Absalom's revolt after David's 20th year of his 33 year rule of Jerusalem. This means that any child who was born to David's concubines in the next year might be the result of Absalom sleeping with his father's concubines.

One might get great joy from the idea that the royal family is filled with people born from forbidden familial relationships. Relationships between family members, while forbidden by Leviticus 18, might have been acceptable. Before Amnon rapes Tamar she tells him, "[David] will not withhold me from you."[70] Alter notes that it is possible that the Levitical prohibition might not have been binding in the early 10th century, or (more

[67] I Kings 1:5
[68] I Kings 1:2
[69] Halpern pp.234
[70] II Samuel 13:13

likely) Tamar says this to buy time and escape Amnon. Suetonius is most known for his work *Twelve Caesars* which focuses more on the sex lives of the Caesars than their politics. The violation in the humorous idea that the royal family is tainted by incest is apparent. It is made benign by happening to the royal family whom the authors already do not like.

This passage combines a few areas that Freud is known for-- particularly royal incest. This scene depicts a son usurping the throne and sleeping with the king's concubines (but in Freud's analysis they would be seen as David's other wives. One of Freud's famous theories is the Oedipus complex where in one's superego suppresses the urge to kill one's father and sleep with one's mother. He considered the suppression of this urge is "the most important social achievements of the human mind."[71]

After defeating the Philistines in Rephaim, David gathers 30,000 soldiers to bring the Ark of God to Jerusalem. When one of the oxen slips, Uzzah reaches out to prevent the Ark from falling. Yahweh becomes angry and strikes Uzzah dead for his transgression. David immediately loses his desire to bring the Ark to Jerusalem and reroutes it to the house of Obed-Edom the Gittite. Upon hearing how Yahweh blesses Obed-Edom's house, David scrambles to take it to Jerusalem. When they reach Jerusalem David offers a sacrifice and begins whirling around dancing in front of the Ark wearing only a linen *ephod*.

This scene has two moments of humor degrading David. The first depicts David's cowardice in the face of Uzzah's death. His cowardice quickly changes to greed when he

[71] Encyclopedia Britannica

hears that Yahweh has blessed the house of Obed-Edom. In I Samuel, David acts very diplomatically[72]: he does not make his true intentions known. Yet after leaving the Ark with Obed-Edom for three months David decides to take the Ark to Jerusalem as soon as he hears that Yahweh blesses Obed-Edom.

In an attempt to downplay David's avarice for blessing, Josephus adds David's internal reasoning for why he decides to collect the Ark from Obed-Edom. He adds, "he took courage, and, hoping that he should meet with no misfortune thereby, he transferred the ark to his own house."[73] Josephus portrays David in a better light than the Masoretic text. Josephus presents a monarch who acts cautiously and humbly in fear of Yahweh. The Masoretic text portrays David becoming angry at Yahweh for killing Uzzah and responding out fear for his own life to pawn the ark on the foreigner Obed-Edom. David's rationalization, in Josephus, for bringing the Ark to Jerusalem shows David again reacting from fear. The Masoretic text depicts David responding to hearing about the blessings Obed-Edom received. Due to a lack of internal monologue in the Masoretic text the audience assumes that David responds to the news that he hears.

The account in I Chronicles 15 is much kinder to David. In this account David does not abandon the Ark out of fear with the Gittite Obed-Edom. Instead, Obed-Edom is a Levite who helps carry the Ark in accordance with the Deuteronomical laws. The Masoretic text does not explain whom David brought to help carry the Ark except Uzzah and Ahio. One can assume that these two sons of Abinadab are not Levites because

[72] See I Sam 17:39, I Sam 20:3, I Sam 27:10
[73] Project Gutenberg – Josephus Ant. 7.4

Yahweh kills Uzzah for touching the Ark. Karel van der Toorn and Cornelis Houtman[74] argue for  dating of the Ark narrative are around the time of Josiah and the Deuteronomic reforms. The authors would have known of these laws and intentionally left these details out. They portray David ignoring the laws about Levites carrying the Ark and show him acting without forethought. For this reason Uzzah's death results from David's choice not to bring Levites. His anger at Yahweh for killing Uzzah then shows David blaming everyone except himself for his own failure.

This scene is funny because David overtly acts on impulses that we suppress – cowardice and avarice. Comedy often comes out of watching others act on these impulses. Groucho Marx often plays a character who exhibits avarice. In *A Night at the Opera*, Groucho plays an agent who is always trying to weasel as much money out of every character as he can. He spends most of the movie following a rich client around trying to protect his stake as her agent. Even in planning television shows today creators include these base impulses. Gary Gilbert, the creator of Sister and other pilot TV shows, says, "when we started to flesh out characters for a new pilot, we should be sure to give them all seven Cardinal Sins—lust, envy wrath, gluttony, pride, sloth, and greed. These are the traits people will recognize and laugh at." When David changes his mind about possession of the Ark based on what he has to gain he plays into this humorous trope.

After deciding to bring the Ark to Jerusalem, David successfully brings it into the gates of his city. David makes a sacrifice to Yahweh. Thereupon he begins dancing by whirling around. The authors explain that David was "girt in a linen *ephod*."[75] Alter notes

[74] Karel van der Toorn and Cornelis Houtman
[75] I Sam 6:14

that, "the *ephod* was probably a short garment tied around the hips or waist, and so David whirling and leaping might easily have exposed himself."[76] The linen *ephod* (*ephod bad*) appears four times in the Bible – three of which are in Samuel and one in the Chronicles version of this pericope. In the first instance Samuel wears the linen *ephod* when he trains as a priest.[77] In the second instance the linen *ephod* is worn by the priests whom Saul tells Doeg to kill.[78] The third, and fourth, are when David wears the linen *ephod* as he dances through the city.[79] David wearing the *ephod* juxtaposes his stature as king and Yahweh's chosen one. Exodus 28:42 gives the command to make a priestly linen covering in order to cover the priests' nakedness. Exodus 20:23 states explicitly that no one should expose his nakedness around the altar. The author indicates that David wears a linen *ephod* it juxtaposes the linen covering's purpose to cover with David's revealed nakedness under the linen *ephod*. His exposure near the Ark creates a clear violation.

When Michal berates David for exposing himself to the people she adds this piece to the image of David as King and chosen one with shameful nudity. This juxtaposition demonstrates the combination of holy and shameful in one image and creates a violation for the ancient Israelite audience. The violation is benign and becomes funny when they realize how absurd the whole scene is. In order to have exposed himself David would have stripped down to only the linen *ephod*.

This image of David stripping down and dancing through the streets alludes to the passage in I Samuel 19 when Saul has an ecstatic episode. Saul too strips naked but does

[76] Alter pp. 457
[77] I Sam 2:18
[78] I Sam 22:18
[79] II Sam 6:14 and I Chron 15:27

not dance. He is humiliated by is wild prophetic ecstasy[80]. In this pericope David makes a deliberate choice to strip down to his linen *ephod* and dance-- exposing himself to everyone.

Michal is the voice of the author. She reprimands David for his display not fitting his stature. She tells him "how honored today is the king of Israel." Her sarcastic comment exhibits the author's feeling towards the monarch. Her comment uses the word ג.ל.ה to describe David exposing himself. This same root is used to describe Noah's nakedness.[81] This root is regularly used to describe sexual impropriety.[82] When Ham sees Noah's nakedness and does not try to cover him he gets cursed. When David reveals himself Michal tells him he should cover himself and David swears that he will not sleep with her anymore. David's responds with a play on words. He uses the word Michal uses, כ.ב.ד., to describe sleeping with the slave girls Michal claims he should not reveal himself to.

[80] See chapter on Saul
[81] Gen 9:21
[82] See Ex 18:7ff

# Conclusion

While we may not be able to understand all of the humor in the book of Samuel there are some threads of humor that are woven throughout. Some of the humor plays into ubiquitous tropes and some play on elements that are universally funny, e.g. scatological humor and anatomical humor. The humor in the narratives is not wholly separate from the narrative, but rather woven throughout the entire work.

Part of the difficulty in picking out the humor is to understand what makes something humorous. Freud explains that what makes something humorous is an expression of repressed psychic energy. In order to really understand the biblical humor one must know what the ancient Israelites needed to repress. One can speculate on the basis of biblical laws, as this paper tried to do, but there is no way to know about the ancient Israelite's actual society outside the biblical depiction.

McGraw and Warner explain that humor arises from a benign violation. The benign violation theory holds that in order for something to be funny it must first be a violation. Again, in order to know what is a violation for the ancient Israelites we must know more about their society than only the biblical depiction. One can work on the assumption that they were human and are not very different from us. Yet a violation in one culture may not necessarily be a violation in another culture today, let alone millennia ago.

For these reasons "cross-cultural researchers have long seen jokes as a vital window into a given society."[83] One can try to intuit about the ancient Israelite society from these common forms of humor, but it is hard to withhold our own assumptions and cultural biases from the analysis. What this paper has done it examine the common tropes and attempted to analyze why it might have been funny.

Most of the humor is meant to undermine those that the joke is about. The humor making fun of the Philistines undermines their military prowess by depicting them suffering from a painful affliction and as stupid. Humor making fun of Saul shows him being foolish and never able to get the upper hand. The humor directed at David shows that he is unfit to rule because he cannot control his house.

It is hard to know if the ideas that come through in the biblical text represent those of the greater Israelite society or simply those of the biblical authors. The Bible is a compilation of hundreds of years of stories and writers. Once the bible became canonized it became hard to look at the work as anything but sacred, but we should keep in mind that humor contains sparks of the divine.

[83] McGraw and Warner pp 104

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